

D&I speech
2016 Associations North Leadership Conference
Mark Salter

[ad-lib something about having attended June 28 board retreat, with focus on D&I training]

I'm going to share a couple of highlights from that meeting – specifically, what we learned from the D&I survey that Associations North conducted back in April.

[walk through survey highlights and next steps]

I want to take that second-to-last point and share a couple of personal thoughts about all of this, starting with the day we went to the training.

As we were getting ready to start the session, I remember feeling curious. I love learning. Those of you who know me would not be at all surprised that one of my top 5 strengths, according to StrengthsFinders, is Learner. I was truly curious about what we were going to learn from the survey, and what we planned to do with this information.

I also remember feeling anger. Why? Because I'm a nice guy and a relatively enlightened human being. I believed I was way past all of this diversity and inclusion stuff. After all, I grew up in the 60s and saw Lyndon Johnson lead the creation and adoption of the Civil Rights Act. I saw people fighting for the Equal Rights Amendment. I saw universities begin to admit more women and minorities, and I saw them entering the work force and breaking through barriers. And while I knew that there were and are problems with equal pay and pockets of bigotry and bias, I believed we had made so much progress that it was only a matter of time – a short time – before these things got sorted out and fixed, once and for all.

But that's not where the anger was coming from. I felt like, once again, I was going to be blamed for things that aren't me, and expected to apologize for things I did not do.

That didn't happen. What did happen is that I heard a simple statement that hit me between the eyes:

“If you're comfortable, someone else isn't.”

I realized I am guilty of being comfortable. And my anger vanished.

I thought I knew about racism. I thought I knew about sexism. I thought I knew about religious intolerance.

I do know about all of these things ... but I know them intellectually. I know them from the comfort of a privileged position – an old white guy who's been comfortable throughout his life.

I don't know these things viscerally. I haven't felt what it's like to be stopped by a police officer and fear for my life. I haven't felt what it's like to do my work and be paid at less than 80 cents on the dollar. I haven't felt what it's like to uproot my family and escape my war-torn country. I haven't felt what it's like to live in a ghetto or on a reservation or on the streets.

I'm going to read something by John Metta, a powerful writer who has helped me understand

normative culture and how it shapes our social expectations and prejudices. He's writing here about racism, but his words also apply to sexism and religious intolerance and homophobia and other issues.

Racism is a difficult problem to address. To paraphrase George Orwell, white people have prejudices about people of color because American culture has normalized whiteness, but the fact that people of color act "differently" further entrenches the "obvious correctness" of a white cultural norm.

White people do not think in terms of we. White people have the privilege to interact with the social and political structures of our society as individuals ... Whites are often not directly affected by racial oppression even in their own community, so what does not affect them locally has little chance of affecting them regionally or nationally. They have no need, nor often any real desire, to think in terms of a group. They are supported by the system, and so are mostly unaffected by it.

What they are affected by are attacks on their own character. To my aunt, the suggestion that "people in The North are racist" is an attack on her as a racist. She is unable to differentiate her participation within a racist system (upwardly mobile, not racially profiled, able to move to White suburbs, etc.) from an accusation that she, individually, is a racist. Without being able to make that differentiation, White people in general decide to vigorously defend their own personal non-racism, or point out that it doesn't exist because they don't see it.

The result of this is an incessantly repeating argument where a Black person says "Racism still exists. It is real," and a white person argues "You're wrong, I'm not racist at all. I don't even see any racism." My aunt's immediate response is not "that is wrong, we should do better." No, her response is self-protection: "That's not my fault, I didn't do anything. You are wrong."

I am that aunt. Her self-protective response has been mine for years. And that was the source of my anger before our training session.

So why tell you all of this? In the weeks since our board retreat, I have run smack into example after example of how I've been comfortable at the expense of others. And I've realized my comfort has led to my indifference, and my indifference is an obstacle to progress.

As the saying goes, "A different world cannot be built by indifferent people." I no longer can afford to be indifferent. I want to learn how we can make Associations North a model for diversity and inclusion – a model I can use to make my own association better.

This conference is my favorite event within Associations North, and has been ever since I first started attending more than 15 years ago. Because it's all about learning how we can be better tomorrow than we are today.

I'm proud that Associations North has embraced the important work of diversity and inclusion. I look forward to this journey we've begun.

And I hope I've made someone uncomfortable here this afternoon – for the right reasons.

Thank you.